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ABSTRACT

In April 1996 survey examined issues that many educators face when facilitating outdoor adventure programs that include persons with disabilities. The survey was returned by 176 of the 487 program directors listed in the 1992 Directory of Experiential Therapy and Adventure-Based Counseling Programs. The great majority of respondents were persons of White, European descent without disabilities. A similar survey was distributed to a staff member randomly selected by each director. Major findings from directors' responses were: 1) programs were accessible and staff attitudes were generally positive toward persons with disabilities; 2) program accommodations for persons with emotional disabilities were easier to implement than those for physical or cognitive impairments; and 3) staff training and consultation on disability issues could be improved. Staff members' responses were generally consistent with directors' assessments. However, staff members expressed some unique preferences with regard to specific disability groups and specific concerns as to staff competencies in meeting the needs of persons with disabilities. Implications for professional practice are discussed. Contains 15 references. (Author/TD)

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Attitudes and Perceptions Concerning Persons with Disabilities: Potential for Growth[1]

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ABSTRACT

This presentation examined issues that many educators express when facilitating outdoor adventure programs that include persons with disabilities. Several introductory exercises designed to provide greater sensitivity regarding disability issues were conducted. Results from a national study of adventure therapy program directors and staff members concerning disability and related concerns were presented. The major findings from directors' responses were that: (a) programs are accessible and staff attitudes are generally positive toward persons with disabilities, (b) program accommodations for persons with emotional disabilities are easier to implement than those for physical and/or cognitive impairments, and (c) staff training and consultation on disability issues could be improved. Information regarding staff members' responses revealed a general consistency with directors' assessments. However, there were some unique preferences with regard to specific disability groups expressed by staff members and specific concerns as to staff competencies in meeting the needs of persons with disabilities. Implications for professional practice were discussed and resource information on related disability topics was provided. The workshop culminated in an activity where audience members designed a staff training program to enhance staff awareness concerning ability and related issues.

Adventure therapy programs have been used with a number of persons with disabilities, including persons with developmental disabilities (e.g., Carter & Foret, 1990; Zemke, Knuth, & Chase, 1984), substance abuse problems (e.g., Kennedy & Minami, 1993), visual impairments (e.g., Stuckey & Barkus, 1986),

[1] Because of space limitations, only data from directors' responses were presented in this compendium. Staff survey responses were presented, however, at the presentation. Persons desiring this information in a more complete report may contact the presenter at the address provided. Copies of the group exercises used in the workshop are also available.

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long-term mental illness (e.g., Roland, Summers, Friedman, Barton, & McCarthy, 1987), and various physical disabilities (e.g., Austin, 1987; Robb & Evert, 1987). Despite greater numbers of persons with disabilities participating in adventure therapy programs (Sugarman, 1993; Terry & Terry, 1995), there are indications that staff attitudes toward and perceptions about persons with disabilities represent a significant barrier (e.g., Havens, 1992). This conjecture has not been tested empirically, however. Further, to what extent staff members perceive competence in serving persons with disabilities, preferences for working with particular disability groups, and attitudes toward working with persons with disabilities has not been examined within the adventure therapy field. Information regarding these issues would benefit staff training in better serving persons with disabilities.

Method

Using the *Directory of Experiential Therapy and Adventure-Based Counseling Programs* (Gerstein, 1992), administrative personnel were asked to participate in the survey. The designated contact person as listed in the *Directory* was sent a research packet in April 1996. The survey packet contained a letter of introduction describing the purpose of the study, survey instrument, and return self-addressed stamped envelope. A similar research survey distributed to a staff member selected at random by the director was also included in the packet. Each director was asked to complete a 3-page survey instrument which contained demographic questions regarding respondent (e.g., ethnicity, gender, disability status, academic training, work experience) and program characteristics (e.g., type of programs offered, staff hiring requirements), professional practices as related to disability issues, and perceived competencies of program staff, training needs, and attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Because of financial constraints, no attempts for follow-up were conducted.

Survey Instrument. Survey items were developed through a selective review of the literature using three strategies. First, articles published in the *Journal of Experiential Education* and the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* that addressed disability themes or used persons with disabilities as part of an adventure therapy intervention were reviewed. Second, four textbooks on adventure therapy were examined with regard to inclusion of disability information (i.e., Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Gass, 1993; Havens, 1992; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). Third, a database search through the National Rehabilitation Information Center using identified descriptors (adventure-based counseling, adventure therapy, experiential therapy, risk education, wilderness therapy) was conducted to identify published articles, conference papers, and papers of limited circulation. This review resulted in a number of content item themes regarding architectural accessibility, staff attitudes toward persons with disabilities, areas of perceived competence and training needs, and adaptation, integration, and participation of persons with disabilities in adventure-based counseling programs. An initial pool of 32 items using a Likert-type scale of 1 ("strongly agree") to 7 ("strongly disagree") was developed and distributed to four adventure-based counseling personnel (two directors and two staff members) and one administrative personnel member affiliated with AEE for their reaction and input. Minor editing changes were recommended and four items were deleted because of redundancy and lack of clarity. The final survey was distributed to organizational members that offered adventure-based counseling and experiential therapy programs within the United States.

Participants. Of the 487 program directors contacted, 176 completed the survey, resulting in a 36% return rate. With respect to demographics, 90 males (57%) and 69 females (43%) were of White, European descent (91%). Respondents tended to be persons without disabilities (96%) who were trained at the

bachelor's level (52%). They had worked an average of almost 7 years in program administration.

Results

Directors' perceptions regarding disability and related issues were somewhat mixed when applied to adventure-based counseling programs. On the one hand, directors seemed unsure as to whether programs were physically designed to accommodate the variety of individual abilities. Similarly, they seemed unsure as to how to adapt programs for persons with severe physical and/or cognitive disabilities and, to a lesser extent, persons with severe emotional problems. One way to address this knowledge gap would be to retain the use of consultants who have disability expertise either through personal experience, formal training, or both. This resource has not been widely used in program design or staff training, however.

With regard to staff knowledge in meeting the needs of persons with disabilities, directors perceive that staff may need additional formal training in several areas, most notably in areas of medical aspects of disability, personal/social adjustment issues, and modifications to accommodate persons with disabilities. Despite this information gap, directors perceive that staff attitudes are generally positive and consistent across disability groups. As further indication of favorable attitudes reported by directors, a general contention is that programs that include both persons with/without disabilities are therapeutically better than programs that include persons of similar disabilities only.

When considering that directors believe that greater numbers of persons with disabilities are expected to participate in adventure programs, they do not necessarily believe that this increase will generate new sources of revenue. Perhaps this perception may, in part, explain why directors are undecided about re

habilitation program staff understanding the value of adventure programs for persons with disabilities.

Limitations and Conclusion

Because of the relatively low response rate, a major concern has to do with generalizability of results. To what extent these results are indicative of the larger majority who did not respond is not known. Given that this study was the first attempt to ascertain directors' perceptions regarding disability and related issues, it serves as a benchmark for subsequent study. A second limitation concerns the issue of using self-report measures. Because the survey ascertained directors' perceptions, it may or may not be indicative of actual behavior or facility practices. Still, one strength of the study was that items pertaining to staff issues were also asked of a staff member chosen at random by the respective director (although these results are not reported in this summary). This comparison provided an analysis as to where perceptual consistency existed between directors and their staff when considering staff knowledge, competence, and attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Future research may wish to survey participants with disabilities regarding the same or parallel questions that were asked of adventure program directors and staff.

Current practice suggests that directors are generally uncertain as to how effectively persons with disabilities are being served and how staff are trained to meet their needs. Although there are considerable physical and emotional challenges that are specifically designed as part of an adventure-based program, one of them should not include staff who are insufficiently prepared or programs that are not universal in design. Greater cooperation between adventure-based personnel, rehabilitation professionals, and consumers is needed (Herbert, 1996).

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